

Greek American Oral History Project

Oral History Interview

with

**Mary Lydon**

April 7, 2006

Sacramento, California

By Courtney Belville  
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Greek American Oral History Project

Interview History for Oral History of  
Mary Lydon

Interviewer's Name: Courtney Belville

Interview Date and Location: The interview was conducted on April 7, 2006, in Mrs. Lydon's home in Sacramento, California.

Context Notes: Mrs. Lydon is the daughter of immigrant parents. Frequent uses of "you know," "um" and "so" have been omitted from the interview transcript. False starts have also been omitted. After we finished the interview, Mrs. Lydon began telling a story about her mother's family in Greece during World War II. I asked if I could turn the tape recorder back on, and she agreed. This explains the two "endings" to the interview.

Tapes and Interview Records: The original tape recordings of the interview and full transcript are held by the Greek Orthodox Church of the Annunciation in Sacramento. Copies of the recording and transcript are deposited the Department of Special Collections and University Archives at California State University, Sacramento.



[Session 1, April 7, 2006]

[Begin Tape 1, Side A]

BELVILLE: This is Courtney Belville. I'm with Mary Lydon at her home in Sacramento, California. It is April 7<sup>th</sup>, 2006. I will be interviewing Mary about her parents' immigrant experiences and her experiences as a member of the Greek American community in Sacramento. This is Tape 1, Side A.

To start, where were you born and when?

LYDON: I was born in Sacramento, California, December 1<sup>st</sup>, 1930.

BELVILLE: So let's begin by discussing your family history and your parent's immigration to the United States. Tell me about your mother. When and where was she born?

LYDON: My mother was born in Hania, Crete. It's an island of Greece.

BELVILLE: And your father . . .

LYDON: He was born also on the same island.

BELVILLE: Can you describe the island of Crete? What is it like there?

LYDON: Um, it is not a large island, but it is very rocky and hilly and it's beautiful. It has some lovely resort areas and some mountainous areas.

BELVILLE: Did your parents grow up in a rural setting, or . . .

LYDON: I believe my father grew up in a village, a rural setting. My mother was raised in a city. It was small, but nonetheless, a city.



BELVILLE: How did your parents meet?

LYDON: I think it was one of those arranged marriages. [Laughs] In those years that's what they did, so I don't know exactly how. I believe my mother said her godfather brought over the prospective groom, and they had made the arrangements like that.

BELVILLE: So your parents met and were arranged to be married in Crete?

LYDON: Yes.

BELVILLE: After they were married, how did they earn a living?

LYDON: I believe they came over to the U.S. right away. My father was a U.S. citizen. He had immigrated here when he was a young teenager. His two or three brothers were working in the mine in Utah. So he immigrated here, worked in the mines, and then also, went into the service: WWI, 1918. So by doing that, he obtained American citizenship. So after their marriage they came back to the U.S.

BELVILLE: So after he served in the war, he went back to Greece . . .

LYDON: Got his bride . . . [Laughs]

BELVILLE: And brought her back to the United States. So then your father wasn't the first to have immigrated to the United States?

LYDON: His brothers had come, but one was killed in the mine when they had that big explosion and the two others returned to Greece. So my father was the only one of his family here.



BELVILLE: So did his brothers come here specifically to find work and . . .

LYDON: I believe so, I'm not sure exactly how that was handled, you know. But I believe so. I think they had contract laborers, or something like that.

BELVILLE: For what reasons did your father and mother decide to leave . . .

LYDON: Greece?

BELVILLE: Yes.

LYDON: I guess my father felt like this was his home, where he could earn a living and where he wanted to be. What my mother said that they came along for their honeymoon, but never returned.

BELVILLE: Was it a common decision to immigrate at that time? For people in Greece to come to the United States?

LYDON: There were a lot of people who were immigrating. I don't know whether it was a common decision, but many of my parents' friends were also immigrants, and such, that had come during those years.

BELVILLE: Do you know if any of their family resisted? If your mothers' parents resisted . . .

LYDON: No, I don't know. I can't imagine, as a parent, that they were really happy about it because it was such a long distance and communication was difficult, transportation was difficult, during those years, you know. In fact, my mother didn't return until the early '60s, I believe, was the first time she had gone back. My father had never gone back.



BELVILLE: Do you know what things they brought with them when they came to the United States?

LYDON: No. I guess my mother had her dowry with linens, and things like that. But other than that, I don't know that they brought anything with them.

BELVILLE: When they came to the United States, did anyone meet them on their arrival here?

LYDON: I don't know that. I know that in the early years lived in Detroit, Michigan, and I believe in Ohio, I'm not sure. And then they migrated to California and lived in the Bay Area for awhile before they came to Sacramento.

BELVILLE: So their first stop was in Detroit . . .

LYDON: In Detroit. . . . Well, their first stop was on Ellis Island. And I don't know whether they stayed in New York. I just don't know that particular information.

BELVILLE: So how did they travel to the United States?

LYDON: By ship.

BELVILLE: Do you know how long of a journey that was?

LYDON: No. My brother has the ticket that my mother had. But I don't know how long the journey was.

BELVILLE: After they came to Detroit, do you what they did to earn a living here?



LYDON: I believe my father worked in the automobile assembly line or factory, whatever. Then they came here, so I'm not sure what else he might have done. But they weren't there too long, because I think they were married in 1928 or '29 and I was born in '30, so they weren't there too many years.

BELVILLE: Once they came to Sacramento, how did they earn a living?

LYDON: My father had a truck farm. He owned a piece of property in Gardenland and raised vegetables during the summer and winter.

BELVILLE: Did your mom partake in the business?

LYDON: Um-hum, she did. We all did in fact, yeah. [Laughs] You know, she helped during the time of harvest and going to market, and getting vegetables ready to take them to market.

BELVILLE: What were some of your tasks?

LYDON: Oh, I had such lovely tasks. I got to pick vegetables. I got to pick the green beans and it was awful, 'cause when it was hot the leaves would stick to you. Picked zucchini. . . . have you ever picked zucchini squash? Well, it's got prickly leaves and, you know, it not much fun to do that. Picked bell peppers and wax peppers and cantaloupe. They had a variety of things. So I got to do that, and then my brother and I got to wash the beets and the carrots and bunch them up, getting them ready to go to market. Packing the tomatoes. It was just all kinds of jobs like that.



BELVILLE: How would you characterize their economic condition in Sacramento?  
Was it fairly good?

LYDON: I really don't know. If you we compare it today, probably on the lower economic stage. They were comfortable. They owned their home. They had it furnished. My father worked very hard. So I would say we were comfortable.

BELVILLE: Do you think your father encountered any trouble finding work in the United States after immigrating here?

LYDON: I don't know. I know that during the war, during the Second World War, he had applied for a position on Mare Island, but he became ill and never got to go there. So I don't know whether that was a problem in obtaining the position or whether it was the illness that kept him from going.

BELVILLE: Did your parents know any English upon their arrival to the United States?

LYDON: Yes. Well, my mother didn't, no. But my father did. In fact, I have some letters that he had written to me while he was in the hospital that were written in English and had good grammar and vocabulary. So, yes, he could communicate quite well. My mother learned her English while she was here.

BELVILLE: How did she go about doing that?

LYDON: I guess it was just by guess and by golly. [Laughs] Once she was here for a while she went to school and learned whatever you have to learn in order



to get your citizenship papers. But she often said how it was so difficult when they would go to the grocery store, and they didn't know how to express to the grocer what it was that they wanted. We had a little taste of that just recently, we went to Italy, and my husband and I would go into the grocery store and we'd look at the packages and everything was written in Italian so you weren't sure what it was that you were buying. I bought some frozen meals, but once I got them back to where my daughter was living, I couldn't read the directions. So, it just gave me a little bit of a flavor of what it must have been like when they first came. I don't imagine it was easy.

BELVILLE: So when did they pursue American citizenship?

LYDON: Well, as I said it, my father had it before he left and then my mother got it, I think, soon after they were here.

BELVILLE: So once they came to the United States, did they maintain contact with their family in Greece?

LYDON: I believe they did, up until the war started when it was difficult to communicate.

BELVILLE: And you said your mother returned to Greece in 1960?

LYDON: '60, '65. . . . it was on a vacation. It was the first time she had gone back to see her family, 'cause she had no close relatives here. She had a person she called her uncle, they might have been a third cousin once removed or



something like that, but she called him uncle. And he was actually my godfather, so that was kind of a closeness with that family and other families who had come at that time. It was just, you called them aunt and uncle and their children were your cousins, related or not I'm not sure.

[Laughs]

BELVILLE: Do you think your parents had any difficulties adjusting to life in the United States?

LYDON: I'm sure my mother did. I don't know about my dad, but I'm sure my mother did. Like I said, she came from a family that was fairly well off in Crete. Then to be brought to America, and to work on a farm, I imagine that was quite a difficult adjustment to make. It would be difficult for me. She never said anything, you know, and didn't seem to complain, but I would imagine it was hard.

BELVILLE: Okay, now let's discuss your childhood experiences and family life.

LYDON: Okay . . .

BELVILLE: Can you tell me the names and birth years of your siblings?

LYDON: My brother is Earnest, call him "Ernie." I don't remember his age.

[Laughs] But I can get those things for you if you want to turn that off.

My sister Katherine and then my sister Liz. And my sister Liz, I can tell you, she was born in 1940.

BELVILLE: We get those dates later after the interview.



LYDON: Okay.

BELVILLE: So all of your siblings were born in the United States?

LYDON: In Sacramento.

BELVILLE: And are you the oldest sibling?

LYDON: Yes.

BELVILLE: What was your relationship with your siblings? Was it friendly?

LYDON: We're very close right now. I think growing up, perhaps we had our differences, you know. Being the older one, it seems like they thought I was the boss. . . . maybe I was. [Laughs] But we were close, we are very close right now.

BELVILLE: So you had a family farm . . .

LYDON: Um-hum.

BELVILLE: Where was that located?

LYDON: 'Gardenland,' I guess it's called Natomas now. But part of it, I think, is still called Gardenland.

BELVILLE: How much land did your father have there?

LYDON: I believe he had about five acres.

BELVILLE: Did he have any help other than your family?

LYDON: Just the family. It was family owned. There was one house it was a rental house on it. He bought a half-acre that was put in my brother's name and had walnuts and a foundation, but that was never completed.



BELVILLE: Where would he sell his produce?

LYDON: When I would go to market with him we went downtown. Do you know where the Whole Foods Market is now on T Street, about Alhambra and T? Well it used to be the Farmer's Market there, and we'd take the produce there. I believe he also sold to Safeway, and there was another wholesale produce place on 16<sup>th</sup> Street. It's still there, I don't know if it's still a produce place, but we go by the buildings often. So those were the places that he went. And market day was Wednesday and Saturday.

BELVILLE: Was your house on the land . . .

LYDON: Yes, it was on that property.

BELVILLE: What chores, did you have as a child?

LYDON: Besides the ones working in the garden? [Laughs]

BELVILLE: Did you have others? [Laughs]

LYDON: Oh, yes I did. [Laughs] My mother had a special chore for me. I had to clean all the cabinets and cupboards every Saturday before I could go to the movies. So that was a big chore. Whether they needed cleaning or not, that was a job I had.

BELVILLE: How long did that take?

LYDON: I don't remember. [Laughs] Probably all morning. And of course doing the dishes. I don't recall other chores. That one really sticks in my head, though.



BELVILLE: When and where did you begin school?

LYDON: North Sacramento Elementary School. I must have been about six years old, I believe. I recall they gave me the choice, I must have been tall, of going into kindergarten or the first grade. And because the first grade sounded like it was nicer than the kindergarten I chose to go into the first grade.

BELVILLE: Do you remember the names of any of your teachers there?

LYDON: Mrs. Yost was my first grade teacher. I really regretted going into the first grade after I got there, because we had a little trip, we went down into Mrs. Steen's kindergarten class, and I saw all the lovely toys they had. They had a dollhouse and they had a little train and all these fun things, and I had wished that I had chosen kindergarten instead. [Laughs]

BELVILLE: How did you do in school? Did you enjoy it?

LYDON: I loved school and I did well.

BELVILLE: While you were in school did you have any extracurricular activities?

LYDON: I was in the a cappella choir and that was about all that I recall that we had. We didn't have a lot of activities or group things. Maybe I joined the Brownies. I don't really remember. If I did, it wasn't for very long.

BELVILLE: Did you have any favorite games or pastimes as a child that you remember?

LYDON: No. We played paper dolls. Activities at school. That's all.



BELVILLE: Who were your closest friends?

LYDON: I have one friend that I still see that was in the first grade with me, her name is Virgina Doyle, and then Carol Faulkner, but she has passed away, another one, Marion Claire, I've lost track of her. But these were some of the people that were really close friends. Another one was Barbara Dyeson, I don't know what happened to her. Some of those same people went onto high school and we remained friends.

BELVILLE: Did they live close to you? Near your family farm?

LYDON: No. Barbara did. Barbara lived five blocks maybe from us, but she was the only one. The others lived in North Sacramento proper.

BELVILLE: So you saw them at school primarily?

LYDON: Um-hum.

BELVILLE: Were many of your friends of Greek descent?

LYDON: No, not while we lived in Gardenland.

BELVILLE: Did your parents monitor at all the children you played with?

LYDON; I doubt it. There wasn't the fear at that time. [Laughs]

BELVILLE: What were your parents' aspirations for you as you were growing up?

LYDON: You know, I don't know what my father's aspirations might have been, because he passed away when I was thirteen. So if he had any, I don't know. My mother didn't have any particular aspiration for me, I don't believe, the only thing she always stressed that it was very important to



continue school and going to college and getting an education. That was something that she really stressed.

BELVILLE: How did your father pass away?

LYDON: He was ill. He had been in the Veteran's Hospital in Palo Alto for almost a year when he passed away. I'm not sure just exactly what it was.

BELVILLE: After he passed away did your family continue to run the farm?

LYDON: No, my mother sold the farm and moved into Sacramento proper.

BELVILLE: Okay, so where did you leave there?

LYDON: On 707 20<sup>th</sup> Street, on 20<sup>th</sup> Street between G and H.

BELVILLE: And did she go to work after that?

LYDON: She worked off and on. It was a little difficult for her with the language barrier and not having any particular skill or training. I do recall she worked as a stock person in one of the department stores, Hale Brothers. She also worked at the Post Office during the night, you know, so that I was home with the others because I was a little older, but not that much older. Sometimes we'd have a family relative living with us that oversaw our care.

BELVILLE: So what were your aspirations for yourself, say in high school?

LYDON: Well, the common thing then was to grow up and be a teacher. But I branched off from that and became a Speech Language Pathologist.

BELVILLE: What high school did you go to?



LYDON: I went to Grant Union High School. It was out in Del Paso Heights.

BELVILLE: Tell me about your experiences in high school. What subjects did you enjoy?

LYDON: I took a college prep course and probably enjoyed English the most, and the languages. I didn't particularly care for History or Math. But I really had a great time in high school. As I said, some of the young friends that I had in elementary school also went to Grant Union. There was another school called Hagenwood (phonetic) that was in another part of the area, and they matriculated to Grant Union High School, so even today I have a little circle of friends that we go to lunch with every month or two that we were a group in high school.

BELVILLE: And you said some of them were some of the same people from elementary school?

LYDON: Yes.

BELVILLE: So tell me about what you did after high school. You just briefly mentioned it.

LYDON: See, I have to mention we lived in town, but I took the Gibson bus to Grant for the four years that I went there because I didn't want to change and go to another school where I didn't know anyone. Once I graduated from high school, then I went to Sac City College. At that time, if you didn't live in the district, you couldn't go there. But because we lived in



the district, we switched over. My friend Gloria also lived in town, and we rode the bus together, so she also went to Sac City. So we got a lot of comments, about "How come you're here when you went to Grant? What are you doing here," well we'd say "Oh, we live in town," "Well then how did you go to Grant?" "Well, we took the bus," you know. [Laughs] They couldn't figure all this out. So I went to Sac City for two years and then I got married and didn't continue on. But I went back to Sac State in 1960, I believe '61, and finished, got my credentials and my degrees.

BELVILLE: Okay, and what did you get your degrees in?

LYDON: I got my degree in Language Arts, and then when I got my Masters it was in Speech Language Pathology.

BELVILLE: You said that was your Masters?

LYDON: Um-hum.

BELVILLE: And you got your Masters at Sac State?

LYDON: Yes, I did.

BELVILLE: Tell me about where you worked after you got your Masters degree.

LYDON: I worked at Folsom Cordova School District for almost three years on a part-time basis, in the schools as a Speech Language Pathologist. And then I went over to the Easter Seals Society and worked there from 1970 until I retired.



BELVILLE: You'll have to tell me exactly what a Speech Language Pathologist does because I . . . [Laughs]

LYDON: Well, we work with children with language and communication problems, speech problems, you've heard people who stutter or have a lisp, all kinds of things. Voice problems. So in school, at least when I was there, we would pull those children out of their regular class and work with them for a period of time either individually or in groups and then they would go back to their class. At Easter Seals, I worked primarily with the adults who had had strokes or head injuries teaching them how to communicate once again. Communication included the reading and the writing.

BELVILLE: Now let's discuss your experiences as a member of the Greek American community. Do you know anything about the Greek American community when your parents first arrived?

LYDON: No.

BELVILLE: No, um . . .

LYDON: In terms of the church? I know they had a lot of friends and they would get together. For example, people would come to my folks' home and my mother would cook and they would have a great time. You know, they would be singing and dancing and just having a wonderful time. Or we would go to someone else's house. Sometimes my father had, I don't want kind of car it was, but it was a little car and we all fit into that, we'd



go to Modesto or to Lodi or Stockton and they would have gatherings of Greek people, different kinds of gatherings. Just kind of had celebrations, I guess. That's my earliest recollections of their involvement.

BELVILLE: In Sacramento during your childhood was there a concentration of Greek businesses, or was there a Greek neighborhood of people?

LYDON: I don't know that there was a concentration of businesses. They seemed to be scattered. There were a lot of businesses, hotels, and saloons down on skid row, or what is called Old Sacramento now. [Laughs] But Second Street between I and K Street. There were quite a few coffee houses, things like that. But, other than that, I don't know.

BELVILLE: Did you or your parents go to the coffee houses?

LYDON: No.

BELVILLE: So as a child, did you and your family attend church?

LYDON: I don't recall attending church when we lived out in Gardenland. Once we moved into town, yes.

BELVILLE: And what church did you attend?

LYDON: The Greek Orthodox Church, the one that was on 7<sup>th</sup> and N Streets.

BELVILLE: And so then once you attended the Greek Orthodox Church did you become active members?

LYDON: Yes, I in fact sang in the choir until the time that I got married. And we'd have choir conferences, other social organizations that my mother



belonged to, and I also belonged to, that we would have gatherings and things. It was a smaller community. There weren't as many people as there as there are now, so you knew everybody.

BELVILLE: What were some of the organizations your mother was involved in and then . . .

LYDON: GAPA, which is the Greek American Progressive Association. [Laughs]

BELVILLE: Good, good, okay, that's coming up. Okay, GAPA . . .

LYDON: And so belonged to the ladies church group, the Philoptochos Society. And, um, my mother was a very active lady. She also belonged to an organization that's kind of the women's council of churches, or something like that, in Sacramento. And she also belonged to the Community Chest, which is now United Way. And Rebecca's, which is another social organization that's non-Greek.

BELVILLE: And what organizations have you been involved in, personally?

LYDON: As a teenager I also belonged to GAPA, to the younger group. [Laughs] Before that I was in Rainbow Girls. And then in college, I was in a sorority.

BELVILLE: Oh, what sorority were you in?

LYDON: Sigma Ota Kai at Sac City.

BELVILLE: Does the younger group of girls for GAPA have a name?

LYDON: We may have had a name, but you know, I don't recall what it was.



BELVILLE: What kind of activities did you . . .

LYDON: We had meetings and dances, and then sometimes we'd go on field trips, like up to the snow. One time we went to a conference in Milwaukee. A group of us were delegates from here, and we had chaperones, went by train. Had a great time. [Laughs]

BELVILLE: I know very little about GAPA. Could you explain its principles and its objectives?

LYDON: It's primarily a social, educational, philanthropic organization. And the other organization at that time that was in town was AHEPA, the American Hellenic Educational, something . . .

BELVILLE: Progressive Association . . .

LYDON: Progressive Association, yeah. [Laughs] So you belonged to one or the other, and there was kind of a little rivalry between the two.

BELVILLE: Was there something that divided the two, as far as what their objectives were?

LYDON: No, I don't think so. I think they had similar objectives, primarily social, but educational and philanthropic.

BELVILLE: Was it important to your parents that you learn about your Greek heritage and Greek customs?



LYDON: Well, I believe so, very important. In fact, when I went to school, when I first started school, I did not speak English. I learned English while I was in school. So the only language we spoke at home was Greek.

BELVILLE: Was that difficult for you in elementary school?

LYDON: I don't remember, I don't remember. It must not have been too bad. I don't have bad memories.

BELVILLE: So at home, when you were living on the farm, did your parents tell you a lot about Greece and . . .

LYDON: I think they talked about it in a general way, you know. My mother would talk about her family, and how her schooling was, and how she grew up. I don't recall my father ever talking too much. His life was very difficult because he would get up very early and he'd go to bed very early, and then he'd work all day. So there wasn't a lot of contact except when we were doing the vegetable stuff, you know, selling the vegetables and traveling together like that.

BELVILLE: You said, at times, you had little parties and things . . .

LYDON: Um-hum.

BELVILLE: Were those also with people who had emigrated from Greece?

LYDON: Yes, yes.

BELVILLE: And so there was dancing and singing, and were those . . .

LYDON: Greek. The songs were in Greek, the music was Greek. [Laughs]



BELVILLE: So that really kind of instilled in you a sense of . . .

LYDON: The culture and the traditions that they have. Easter or Christmas, and all of those holidays, had certain cultural aspects to them that were followed and carried, and that is the way we learned them.

BELVILLE: Did your mother cook Greek food?

LYDON: Oh, yeah. Entirely.

BELVILLE: Was that difficult for her. I mean as far as the grocery stores . . .

LYDON: I think initially, it probably was. But once she learned English and could read the labels and know what she was buying, I don't think it was difficult.

BELVILLE: Did she pass that on to you? Do you cook Greek food?

LYDON: No, not really. It's not one of my favorite activities. In fact, she would try to teach me how to cook, and you know, it took all day it seemed to me. You do all the preparation and then you'd have to wait until it was finished to do some more stuff to it, and I didn't have that much patience for it, so I never really learned. I'm doing a little bit more of it now as I have aged, but I didn't really do a lot.

BELVILLE: Did any of your siblings pick it up?

LYDON: My youngest sister Liz does a lot of Greek cooking. It's too time consuming really.

BELVILLE: I'd imagine.



LYDON: A lot of the things are like casseroles, where they're on the top of the stove and it takes a lot of preparation. I did like to bake, you know, but a lot of Greek things require a lot of time in terms of preparation and then baking and such. If you like it, it's okay.

BELVILLE: Did you ever attend Greek school?

LYDON: A little bit, once we moved in town, a little bit. My mother had me with a private teacher, and so I went to her for a while.

BELVILLE: Tell me about what things you learned and what it was like.

LYDON: Well, at that time I was in high school and was taking Latin, so it wasn't too difficult for me. But I would go to her house and we would have a regular lesson. We'd have the vocabulary, and the grammar, and I had to learn the alphabet. I never did learn to read really proficiently, or to write. It's still difficult for me to write. I can read with difficulty. But in terms of the language, that was okay, easy.

BELVILLE: So do you continue now to be able to speak Greek fluently?

LYDON: I can get by. You know, when you don't use a language a lot, you kind of lose some of it. So I find that when we go to Greece, their vocabulary is a bit different than what we have learned here. Sometimes we tend to Anglicize a Greek word. So it is a little more difficult. And they seem to speak more rapidly in Greece than they do here. [Laughs] But I can get by.



BELVILLE: Did your parents practice or celebrate any specific Greek holidays or customs or traditions?

LYDON: Easter is a big one that comes to my mind. New Years is another one. Christmas is always a big holiday. Name Days, you know when you're named after a saint and it's that saint's name, they call it the Name Day. It was more like they celebrated a Name Day rather than a birthday. So, Name Days. And those were the times when company would come, and you'd have dinner and the festivities of the celebration.

BELVILLE: Did you ever feel conflicted between your American and your Greek identities?

LYDON: No.

BELVILLE: You said your mother belonged to GAPA and you belonged to GAPA, are you a member of it today?

LYDON: No. A lot of the people who were members at the time that I was, we all kind of dropped out, and we got married, and had families, and things like that. But a lot of them have rejoined are always saying, "Come-on, join us, we have a wonderful time," but I haven't taken the step yet.

BELVILLE: Do you know what kinds of things do they do today?

LYDON: No, I think they have meetings and have lunch. Oh, and they do have some social events. They have one that they call the Taverna Night and I think it's sometime in the summer and they have a bar-b-que and such,



and its outdoors and it's a lot of fun. We attend those, but I haven't joined or participated in the planning or organization of it.

BELVILLE: Now let's discuss your family life and getting married, and having children. How did you meet your spouse?

LYDON: Actually, we met first when I was a senior in high school and he was going to Grant [inaudible] College, and I was taking some classes there. They allowed us as seniors, when we'd completed all our requirements, to go over to the college and take some classes. So I was taking English and German and he happened to be in those classes, so we met then. But, you know, that was it. And then when I went to city college, our sorority had a party with a Davis fraternity, because he was going to Davis at the time. And when he came to the party, then we got reacquainted and started dating from then.

BELVILLE: Is your spouse Greek?

LYDON: No, no, he's Irish and Lithuanian. [Laughs] And that did cause some consternation, because it's expected that you marry someone who was Greek and also someone who is Greek Orthodox.

And I have to say, I was probably the first person in our community to marry outside of the culture and the church. But we were married in the church, but someone who was not Greek Orthodox. One of my cousins was engaged, at the time, to a person who was non-Greek.



And I was crossing my fingers, and hoping that she would get married before me, but she didn't, she didn't! [Laughs] So I had the distinction of being the very first one, which didn't sit well with anyone.

BELVILLE: Did anybody actually speak out against it?

LYDON: I think my mother accepted it finally, and others did too, my godparents. But my mother later said, because of me, none of my siblings married a Greek person. You know, she would throw that up once and awhile. I set the standard so to speak. But that was all. I think she was very fond of my husband, and she often said when she first met him, she knew that was what was going to happen. She perceived it.

BELVILLE: So did your husband ask for your hand in marriage? Did he come to your mother and ask?

LYDON: He talked to my mother and he talked to my godfather.

BELVILLE: And how did they react to him?

LYDON: I don't know. I guess it was okay. [Laughs]

BELVILLE: You have children . . .

LYDON: Um-hum

BELVILLE: What are their names and ages?

LYDON: I have four children. I have two boys and two girls. The oldest boy is Rick, named after his father, Richard Martin, Jr. [Coughs] He was born in 1951 in October, so he'll be 55 this year. Michael, the second son, was



born in 1952 in October. Then two years later, we had another child, Mary Elizabeth, call her Mary Beth, and she was born in '54. And then, Diane, our last child, was born in 1958.

BELVILLE: Where did they go to school?

LYDON: All four of them went to El Camino High School. All four of them went to Oroville Wright Elementary School, and then onto the high school.

BELVILLE: Did your children ever attend Greek School?

LYDON: No, they didn't. . . . Wait a minute, I think they did. I think they did for awhile, but not too long. They did go to Sunday school, until they got to be teenagers and then they kind of resented, or not resented, but didn't want to go anymore. Too many other activities.

BELVILLE: So did your children regularly attend church with you at the Greek Orthodox Church?

LYDON: Yes, in their early years. Until they got into junior high school, when they got to be about fourteen, fifteen they stopped going to Sunday School.

BELVILLE: Was it important for you to instill a strong sense of Greek identity in your children?

LYDON: It was important, but when you have mixed marriage a little difficult to stress as much as you might like, so you kind of hold back a bit. My husband, like I said, is non-Greek, he's a Catholic. So I didn't want to make religion an area of conflict, and so we just kind of soft-peddled it.



They did go to school, they were baptized, they were christened, they did go to Sunday school. But we didn't participate a lot in the social activities. The other reason for that was financially, perhaps, it was not as easy to do that during those years. So we didn't participate in a lot of the social activities that I did as a youngster growing up.

And at that time, they didn't have all the activities that they do now for the young people, which is a big difference. They have the dance group now. They have little groups for the different age groups of children in Sunday school. And it's much nicer now, and you get more involved with fun types of things. At the time that my children were growing up, the only thing they had was either Greek School or Sunday school, none of this social stuff for kids.

BELVILLE: So today they have a lot of these social programs . . .

LYDON: A lot of things, a lot of social programs for the young people. It's not just getting together socially, but they do activities, for example, they'll raise funds or have a food drive or something. They do things that are meaningful and get them out into the community also, teaching them that they have to be aware of the community around them and what the needs of the people might be. So it's really wonderful. They've done a lot towards that. We didn't have that. I didn't have that growing up, and my youngsters didn't have that either.



BELVILLE: So your husband being Catholic and you being Greek Orthodox, how did you mitigate that? Did you try to share your Greek identity with them?

LYDON: Yes, like I said, the cultural part, the social activities and things are easy. Because he really likes the people that were close friends and relatives and such. So that wasn't difficult. He wasn't really an active churchgoer. So when he did go to church I would go with, and he would go with me on occasions that were special. But he didn't go every Sunday or something like that.

BELVILLE: As a youth, young adult, and into your adulthood do you feel you have experienced any bias or prejudice on account of your Greek identity?

LYDON: I never really noticed any at all. I had someone once tell me, another Greek person, when I was in high school I ran for . . .

[End Tape 1, Side A]

[Begin Tape 1, Side B]

BELVILLE: You were just telling me that in high school you ran for student body president, and that someone responded negatively about you being Greek. So do you feel that that there was any sense of that in Sacramento at that time? Because was this in, 19 . . .

LYDON: It would have been 1943. No, I just might not have been sensitive to it. If there was anything there, I wasn't aware of it. I was just floating around in a cloud, my own cloud, maybe. So, I don't know.



BELVILLE: In Sacramento at that time were there other racial prejudices against other groups of people?

LYDON: Reflecting back, probably against blacks and maybe Mexicans. But I never experienced any. There were a couple of black students at Grant High and they just seemed to fit in with everyone. We had a few Mexican people, and they were just like everyone else. So I never noticed that there was any prejudice. But reflecting back now, since the Civil Rights Movement and all of that, you realize that 'oh yeah, I guess people didn't want blacks or Mexicans around,' and maybe they didn't want the Greeks around. I don't know. I personally didn't experience it.

BELVILLE: One thing I didn't ask before, did your husband serve in World War II?

LYDON: Yes.

BELVILLE: What did he do?

LYDON: He was in the army and he was in the Pacific, just towards the end of the war he was in Japan.

BELVILLE: And what were you doing? Had you met him before?

LYDON: No, no we met after.

BELVILLE: After, okay, and so you were attending city college at that time . . .

LYDON: No. Yes. Well, no, actually we met when I was attending my last year of high school. Because he was born and raised in Illinois, in Chicago, and he came to California to go to school. He chose Sacramento because he



had gone through Sacramento while he was in the service and liked the town. So he came to go to school here, and we met.

BELVILLE: Once you two were married, what was he doing for a living?

LYDON: He worked as a chemist at the Libby McNeal cannery for a little while. But then he got on at Aerojet General, and worked there until he retired. Almost forty years, I think.

BELVILLE: What does he have his degree in?

LYDON: His degree is in Animal Husbandry, cause at the time he went to Davis it was a two-year university only in Animal Husbandry and Veterinary Medicine. So his degree is in Animal Husbandry, but he has been a chemical engineer. So that was his profession.

BELVILLE: How has the Sacramento Greek American community changed in your lifetime?

LYDON: First of all it's much larger. There's an increase in population. People have come from all over the U.S. There's still a closeness, there's still a faction. There's always been kind of a faction in Sacramento, usually around the church. Either they like the priest or they don't like the priest, it seems like that still exists you know. I've forgotten your question now. I got off . . .

BELVILLE: Oh, it's okay. How has the Sacramento Greek American community changed in your lifetime?



LYDON: I think probably the people are more community minded then they were before, perhaps, just reflecting back. And like I said, they're doing a great deal more with the younger people than they did before. They're providing more for them. The church has changed a lot to accommodate people who didn't speak Greek very fluently, so now we have some Greek and English in our service. I don't know how else it has changed, but in those areas, you know. It's grown just like all communities have grown.

BELVILLE: Have you been to Greece? Have you traveled there?

LYDON: Um-hum, I have. The first time I went was in 1979. My husband and I spent almost a month there. And then I went again in '84. And then I went again in the early 90's. And then just a couple years ago for a week or two weeks. But the others were longer times.

BELVILLE: Were you able to travel to where your parents had lived?

LYDON: I did. I was able to go to the village where my father grew up and saw the house where he had been born. His one brother was still alive at the time that we went in 1979. He was in his late 90s, and he said he was very happy to see me and to meet me, but he wondered where my brother was, because the first male was the person that was most important in the family. So he said he was really happy that I was there, but he wished that my brother had gone. And my brother had planned to go, but something



happened and he wasn't able to make the trip with us. But it was really interesting meeting him and his son, my cousin, and his wife and his children.

And we maintain some contact, so when we do go we visit the village there and it's really interesting. It's small, they live off whatever they make, they have animals, they have pigs, they have chickens, they have goats. And then they might trade their eggs to someone who has cheese or something. And it's really kind of interesting the way they still live. It's almost primitive, you might say, compared to how we have our homes and how we live now.

And my mother's home in Crete, my grandfather had died, and my uncle still lived in the house they had as a vacation house. They lived in the city, but they had this little vacation house that was not too far from where they were distance wise, it was maybe an hour or two. My uncle lived there and we got to visit there and stay there, actually.

BELVILLE: So do you keep in contact via letters . . .

LYDON: Telephone mostly. Most of our cousins are now in Athens. They left Crete because of the lack of employment and things, and have established themselves in Athens. So we communicate by phone, not really often, but we do maintain . . .



One of my mother's brothers came here and lived here until he retired and then he went back to Greece. So my aunt travels back and forth, and she'll spend three or four months here and then she'll go back to Greece. So we maintain contact with her.

BELVILLE: Do you feel that you really still maintain a strong sense of Greek identity?

LYDON: Um-hum. And it's interesting, because even though I haven't stressed it a lot with my children, and their cousins, they all are very strong in their desires to maintain traditions and culture. For example, when we get together at Easter they all make a point of coming and just sharing the day and the celebration that goes along with it, different things like that.

BELVILLE: You said your siblings didn't marry Greek . . .

LYDON: No, no.

BELVILLE: Do they still maintain a strong Greek identity?

LYDON: Greek identity, yes. They aren't all active in church activities, but they do maintain a strong Greek identity.

BELVILLE: And what is your church involvement today? Do you . . .

LYDON: I've joined the women's Philoptochos Society, I'm on their board. So I do whatever needs to be done in connection with the group.

BELVILLE: You said it's the women's, what is the . . .

LYDON: Philanthropic. It's called the Ladies Philoptochos Society. I can spell it for you later. [Laughs] But it's the philanthropic social part of the group.



If people have needs, they make those needs known, and we try to assist them in whatever problem they're having at the time. Not just the Greek community, but others also. I'm the chairman of the social committee, so to speak, so when someone calls and says, "I can't pay my rent this month, is there anything that the church can do to help?" they refer them over to me and I see if there's something that we can do to assist them through that period of time that they're having a problem.

BELVILLE: Does the church today have recent immigrants from Greece coming to the church?

LYDON: I don't know that there are any recently. There are a lot that came in the early '50s, a lot of people came over then but I don't know that there are many now. If they do, they seem to assimilate very quickly.

BELVILLE: Is there anything you would like to add?

LYDON: No. [Laughs] I think we've covered it pretty much. I'm not sure just what else. I had a wonderful childhood growing up, not so much the younger years when we lived on the farm, I really didn't like that. But afterwards, when we lived in town, and being involved with the other young people my age that were in the choir practice and such, and GAPA, we had a great time. And I look back fondly on the memories and the friendships that we made at those times.

BELVILLE: Well, thank you very much.



LYDON: You're welcome.

BELVILLE: It was a pleasure, that you very much.

[Stop tape]

[Start tape]

BELVILLE: We're back on, you were just telling me about during World War II.

LYDON: I mentioned that one of the things that I missed in my life was not knowing my grandparents, because we didn't go over there until after World War II. My sister and her husband brought my grandfather over for Christmas one year and he stayed here about three months, and he stayed here about three months, I think, four months, it was really a pleasure getting to know him. We got to know three of my mothers' brothers and one of her sisters.

The other sister had died before we took our trip to Greece, and her twin was killed by the Nazis during World War II. And all her siblings, except the very youngest one, were taken by the Germans from Greece because they were in the Resistance Movement. During my uncle's marriage, the Germans came during the celebration and rounded up all of them and took them to Germany and they were in the Nazi camps and they were Dachau and Auschwitz. So that was kind of a sad part that they went through all that. However, my uncle did not seem to be bitter, nor did my grandfather. When he was here we talked about it, and it was like these



things happen and there is nothing we could do, you just go on with your life. So it was part of the history.

My young nephew, my sister's son, has made a documentary on the story of the Greek Resistance. It was called *The Eleventh Day*. It might be interesting to you. I think he has a website also, entitled "The Eleventh Day" if you would like to look it up. It just talks about the Greek Resistance and that was what my mother's siblings were involved in.

They would take the pilots who had downed and take them through this canyon and put them out, so they would go from Greece to North Africa to escape. And the sister that was killed had worked for a German general because she spoke German, and she would obtain secrets and pass them on to the resistance. So when she was found out, they put her in prison, and then as my uncle has told us, she was shot while they got to watch. While they were in prison and took her and put her out wherever they were in eyesight and shot her. So that was the one twin. The other twin was taken to German Nazi camps and was put through all those horrible medical experiments that they went through. In fact, my uncle said *Schindler's List* was very true, if you've seen that movie, it was very true.

BELVILLE: And so your grandfather came here and visited. Now during World War II, was he also taken?



LYDON: No, no, just the three boys and the two girls. And the very youngest one was not taken because somehow or other they hid her under a table that was covered with a tablecloth, so they missed her. But they took my three uncles and my two aunts. And I told you they were picked up during my uncle's wedding, and they had been turned in by his former finance. I guess she felt jilted, so her family turned them in.

BELVILLE: Wow.

LYDON: Not good.

BELVILLE: Oh my gosh. Did any other family come to visit?

LYDON: Yes, my mothers' sister, her youngest sister, the one that wasn't taken came to visit one year. My mother was the oldest of the family. Her brother and his wife came, and then the next brother came. They just came for visits. The very youngest brother immigrated to the U.S. with his family at the time. His wife and he had three children. Two of the children are still here, the one daughter went back to Greece after she graduated from Davis. And my aunt and uncle returned after he retired.

BELVILLE: And you did have any remembrances of when your grandfather came to visit or when your aunt came to visit, was there celebration?

LYDON: Oh, we had a wonderful time. Yeah, of course we got together for dinners and visits and things. My grandfather, because he was here for a longer period of time, I remember we took him fishing. My brother-in-law had a



big boat and we went fishing, and he was just thrilled to catch a fish. And we went to the parks and had picnics and things. It was a great bonding time, something that we had missed.

BELVILLE: Did he tell you lots of stories about Greece, about his childhood at all?

LYDON: No, no, he didn't seek to engage in those kinds of conversations. My Uncle Manolis was here, we took him to Napa to the vineyard, because he wanted to go out and see what we had in the way of wine. He was so amazed at the amount of the grape vines that we have here. He said, "that was more than the just whole island of Greece," so he was really impressed. And the other thing that impressed him was that people were so polite when they drove here, that they didn't use their horn a lot like they do in Greece. Those are the two things that seem to really stick with him and that he talked about.

BELVILLE: Now your uncle, was he taken during World War II? Is this the same uncle?

LYDON: Um-hum

BELVILLE: And he survived . . .

LYDON: Yeah, they all survived, except the one sister. And they all had their scars, and things, but they all survived. After they were liberated, I don't know whether the Russians liberated them or the Americans liberated them, but they had to walk from Germany to Greece. And as they told us, they had



to be very careful cause they didn't know who was friend and who was enemy. And they grabbed food as they could. They really scrounged until they could get back home. I guess someone mentioned that my grandparents were getting ready to have a memorial service thinking they had expired, when they all showed up. So it was really a wonderful, wonderful homecoming for them and for my grandparents.

BELVILLE: That is a really saddening and also wonderful story, to hear that several of them made it back.

LYDON: Yeah, and my mother all this time had no way of knowing what was going on at all. And I remember going to the movies with her and watching the newsreels, at that time we had newsreels, and that was the way we were getting our information. And how she worried until she learned that they were okay.

BELVILLE: After they came to the United States, how did she keep in contact with her family?

LYDON: Letters. Occasional phone calls, but not too much, but letters mostly.

BELVILLE: Very interesting. Well, thank you for that.

LYDON: You're welcome.